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ABSTRACT

The American Revolution transformed the American colonies into republics, which meant that ordinary people were no longer to be considered "subjects" to be ruled as they were under a monarchy. They were thereafter to be citizens--participants themselves in the ruling process. Because the process of creating of a republican citizenry seemed so simple for us, we have believed it ought to be simple for others. It seems to us to be merely a matter of allowing the people to vote. Because voting is the most obvious means by which the people participate in politics, we have tended to emphasize the right to vote as the necessary and sufficient criterion of democratic politics. But this is a mistake. The suffrage is clearly a prerequiste for democratic politics, but it is hardly all there is to it. It is important for us in our bicentennial celebrations to examine our Revolution and its heritage and to seek to understand the sources of our political practice and values. Only with knowledge of the conditions that underlie the principle of consent in our polity can we confront the world and the future. Voting is in fact only the exposed tip of an incredibly complicated political and social process. How this progress came about and how the people became involved in politics are questions that lie at the heart of the American Revolution. (Author/JM)

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GORDON S. WOOD

REVOLUTION AND THE POLITICAL INTEGRATION OF THE ENSLAVED AND DISENFRANCHISED

Delivered at
the House of Representatives' chamber,
Kentucky State Capitol
Frankfort, Kentucky
on January 9, 1974

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REVOLUTION AND THE POLITICAL INTEGRATION OF THE ENSLAVED AND DISENFRANCHISED

Distinguished Lecture Series on the Bicentennial

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revolution · continuity · promise

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The radical character of the American Revolution is a subject of some historical controversy. Yet in one important respect there can be no denying its radicalism. The Revolution transformed the American colonies into republics, which meant that ordinary people were no longer to be considered "subjects" to be ruled as they were under a monarchy. They were thereafter to be citizens—participants themselves in the ruling process. This is what democracy has come to mean for us.

The profoundest revolution of the past 200 years has been this introduction of ordinary people into the political process. For America and the rest of the Western world, this Revolution was most dramatically expressed at the end of the eighteenth century—"the age of the democratic revolution," as it has been called.[1] This bringing of the people into politics extended through the next fifty years in the United States, while in Western Europe it took much longer, requiring at least the greater part of the nineteenth century. And of course for the rest of the world the process is still going on. In fact since 1945 with the emergence of new nations and the Third World, we have been witnessing what has been called a "participation explosion," [2] the rapid incorporation into

[1] R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760-1800*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959, 1964).

[2] Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., Inc., 1965), p. 2.

the political process of peoples who had hitherto been outside of politics, in a hurried, even a desperate, effort by underdeveloped nations to catch up with the modern democratic states.

More than anything else this incorporation of common ordinary people into politics is what sets the modern world apart from what went on before. Americans were in the vanguard of this development. Our assumption of the leadership of the democratic nations is not simply based on our preponderance of power since 1945. Ever since the American Revolution we have claimed the leadership of the Free World, even when we were an underdeveloped nation ourselves and our claims were treated with bemused contempt by Europe. Our assertions of leadership were based on our priority in time: we were the first modern nation to have a democratic revolution and to establish a republic in which citizenship and political participation belong to the whole community. The French Revolution and all the other European revolutions of the nineteenth century were in our eyes merely examples or species of the revolutionary genus that we had created. Part of the explanation for the intensity of the ideological confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union since the Communist Revolution of 1917 comes from the Soviet Union's claim that it has created a new revolutionary tradition, a new revolutionary genus, one which threatens to usurp our position in the vanguard of history.

We Americans have never been able to figure out why the rest of the world has had such a hard time catching up with us. Because the process of creating a republican citizenry seemed so simple for us, we have believed it ought to be simple for others. It seems to us to be merely a matter of allowing the people to vote. Because voting is the most obvious means by which the people participate in politics, we have tended to emphasize the right to vote as the necessary and sufficient criterion of democratic politics. But this is a mistake. The suffrage is clearly a prerequisite for democratic politics, but it is hardly all there is to it. It is important for us in our bicentennial celebrations to examine our Revolution and its heritage and to seek to understand the sources of our political practice and values. Only with knowledge of the conditions that underlie the principle of consent in our polity can we confront the world and the future. Voting is in fact only the exposed tip of an incredibly complicated political and social process. How this process

came about and how the people became involved in politics are questions that lie at the heart of the American Revolution.

I

The American Revolution was both a consequence and a cause of democracy. It came to mark a decisive change in the way political activity was carried on in America. It gave new legitimacy to the involvement of common people in politics. It was not, however, simply a matter of enfranchising new voters. Although the franchise in colonial America was confined by property qualifications as it was in eighteenth century England, property owning was so widespread that the colonists enjoyed the broadest suffrage of any people in the world: perhaps 80 percent of white adult males could vote. Yet the fact remains that most of those enfranchised did not exercise the right. The social structure and social values were such that colonial politics, at least when compared to politics in post-revolutionary America, were remarkably stable, and the percentage of the people actually voting and participating in politics remained small—much smaller even than today. In the eighteenth century the legal exclusion of the propertyless from the franchise was based not on the fear that the poor might confiscate the wealth of the aristocratic few, but on the opposite fear: that the aristocratic few might manipulate and corrupt the poor for their own ends. Established social leaders expected deference from those below them, and generally got it and were habitually reelected to political office. There were no organized political parties and no professional politicians in today's sense of those words. Established merchants, wealthy lawyers, and large planters held the major offices and ran political affairs as part of the responsibility of their elevated social positions. It was rare for a tavern keeper or small farmer to gain a political office of any consequence. Men were granted political authority in accord not with their seniority or experience in politics but with their established economic and social superiority. Thus Thomas Hutchinson, son of a distinguished Boston mercantile family, was elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives

at the age of twenty-six and almost immediately became its speaker. Social and political authority was indivisible and men moved horizontally into politics from the society, rather than (as is common today) moving up vertically through an exclusively political hierarchy.

Yet politics in eighteenth-century colonial America was unstable enough in many areas that members of the elite struggled for political power and precedence among themselves. The social hierarchy was sufficiently confused at the top that it was never entirely clear who was destined to hold political office and govern. It was obvious that well-to-do lawyers or merchants were superior to, say, blacksmiths, but among several well-to-do lawyers or merchants superiority was not so visible and incontestable. These were the conditions that led to the formation of political factions—the shifting conglomerations of competing elites that characterized much of eighteenth-century colonial politics. While some members of the elite sought the leverage of the Crown in gaining and wielding political power, others turned to the only alternative source of political authority recognized in eighteenth century Anglo-American political theory—the people.

In the half century before the Revolution these competing elites found themselves, as a tactical device, invoking "the people" to offset the power of the Crown and to gain political office. In the process they steadily mobilized elements of the population that had not been involved in politics earlier. This popularization of politics during the decades before the Revolution can be traced in various ways—in the rise in voter participation, the increase in contested elections, the resort to caucuses, tickets and other forms of political organization, and the growth of campaign propaganda and professional pamphleteering. This is how democracy began to develop. It was not the result of the people arousing themselves spontaneously and clamoring from below for a share in political authority. Rather democracy was created from above: the people were cajoled, persuaded, even frightened into getting involved. Each competing faction tried to outdo its opponents in posing as a friend of the people, defending popular rights and advancing popular interests. Yet over time what began as a pose eventually assumed a reality that had not been anticipated. The people having been invoked could not easily be laid to rest. By the

middle decades of the eighteenth century, American politics was on the verge of a radical transformation—a radical transformation that was both expressed and amplified by the Revolution.

The Revolution made the people sovereign. The practices of mobilizing the people into politics that had begun before the Revolution now increased dramatically, as political leaders competed with each other for the power and endorsement that being a friend of the people brought. First the authority of the English government was challenged for its inability to represent not only the American people but its own people as well. Then in America all authority was challenged by what eventually seemed to be ceaseless appeals to the people. For no institution seemed capable of embodying their will. The Revolution so intensified the people's dominance in politics that there could never thereafter be any escaping from them. In America's new republican consciousness there could be nothing else in politics—no orders, no estates, no lords, no court, no monarch, not even rulers in the traditional sense—only the people. How they expressed themselves, how they participated in government, how they gave their consent, how they were represented were questions that preoccupied Americans in the Revolution and ever after.

During the Revolution Americans put together an idea of popular representation in government that we have never lost. The controversy and debate with England in the 1760s exposed a basic Anglo-American difference of experience and viewpoint concerning representation—a difference that only widened with the Revolution. For their part the English clung to what they called "virtual representation." England's eighteenth-century electorate comprised only a small proportion of its population and bore little relation to shifts in that population. The electoral districts were a hodgepodge left over from centuries of history. Thus ancient rotten boroughs like Old Sarum, completely depopulated by the eighteenth century, continued to send members to the House of Commons while newer large cities like Manchester and Birmingham sent none. Such apparent anomalies were justified on the not unreasonable grounds that each member of Parliament should represent not any particular locality but the whole community. Parliament, as Edmund Burke said, was not "a *congress* of ambassadors from different and hostile interests . . . but . . . a *deliberative*

assembly of *one* nation, with *one* interest, that of the whole." [3] To the English what made a member of Parliament representative was not voting or the electoral process, which were considered incidental, but the mutuality of interests that presumably existed between the representative and the people. This mutuality of interests tied the people to the representative even without the exercise of the franchise. Hence the English thought of the members of Parliament as virtually representing all those who did not vote for them—including the colonists.

To the Americans, however, whose experience in politics had developed differently from that of the mother country, representation possessed an actual and local character. Their electoral districts were not the consequence of history going back to time immemorial but were recent and regular creations that bore a distinct relation to changes in their population. When a new county or a town was created by the colonists, it was usually granted immediate representation in the legislature. Thus Americans came to think of their legislatures as precisely what Burke denied they should be—as congresses of ambassadors from different and contending localities and interests, of all whose consent had to be real and explicit. Hence they could not accept the British contention that they were virtually represented, like the people of Manchester, in the English Parliament and therefore capable of being taxed by it. In the course of a century and a half the American colonists had developed such a keen awareness of the individuality of their interests that they could not understand how anyone could speak for them in whose election they had no voice. Such a sense of particularity put a premium on voting as the sole measure of representation and on ensuring that all participated equally in the process of consent.

The ramifications of these ideas about representation were immense and we are still feeling their effects today. During the Revolution and in the years following, they led, first, to heightened demands for an expansion of the suffrage and, second, to the growing notion of "one man, one vote," a notion which has resulted in continual attempts to relate representation to demographic changes. Finally the belief that voting itself was the sole criterion

[3] Edmund Burke, "Speech to the Electors of Bristol" (1774), *The Works of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke*, rev. ed. (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., Inc., 1865-66), vol. 2, p. 96.

of representation has in time transformed all elected officials, including governors and members of upper houses, into other kinds of representatives of the people, standing in a sometimes awkward relationship to the original houses of representatives.

This extreme localism and the demand for actuality of representation had more than constitutional importance. It had social implications of even greater significance for the character of our politics. Even before the revolutionary turmoil had settled, some Americans were arguing that mere voting by ordinary men was not a sufficient protection of ordinary men's interests, if only members of the elite were being elected. It was coming to be thought that in a society of diverse and particular interests men from one class or group, however educated and respectable, could not be acquainted with the needs of another class or group. Wealthy college-educated lawyers or merchants could not know the concerns of poor farmers or small tradesmen. The logic of the actuality of representation expressed in the Revolution required that ordinary men be represented by ordinary men. It was not enough for elected officials to be simply *for* the people; they now had to be *of* the people as well.

Such an idea constituted an extraordinary transformation in the way people looked at the relation between government and society; it lay at the heart of the radicalism of the American Revolution. It was strengthened by a powerful ideological force—equality—the most important and corrosive doctrine in American culture. At the outset of the Revolution, equality to most American leaders had meant an equality of legal rights and the opportunity to rise by merit through clearly discernible ranks. But in the hands of competing politicians seeking to diminish the stature of their opponents and win votes, the idea of equality was expanded in ways that few of its supporters had originally anticipated to mean in time that one man was as good as another. This meaning of equality soon dissolved the traditional identity between social and political leadership and helped to give political power to the kinds of men who had hitherto never held it. Politics became egalitarian after the Revolution in ways it never had been before, and the political upstarts—obscure men with obscure backgrounds—launched vigorous attacks on the former attributes of social superiority—names, titles, social origins, family connections—and bragged that

their own positions were based not on relatives or friends but only on what their money had made for them.

We have a particularly illuminating example of the new attitudes in the case of a William Thompson, an unknown tavern keeper of Charleston, South Carolina, of the early 1780s. John Rutledge, a distinguished social and political leader in South Carolina, had sent a female servant to Thompson's tavern to watch a fireworks display from the roof. Thompson denied the servant admittance and sent her back to Rutledge, who was furious and requested that Thompson come to his house and apologize. Thompson refused and, believing his honor affronted by Rutledge's arrogant request, challenged Rutledge to a duel. Now the social likes of Rutledge did not accept challenges from tavern keepers, so Rutledge went to the South Carolina House of Representatives, of which he was a member, and demanded that it pass a bill banishing Thompson from the state for insulting a member of its government. Thompson took to the press for his defense and in 1784 made what can only be described as a classic expression of American egalitarian resentment against social superiority—a resentment voiced, as Thompson said, not on behalf of himself but on behalf of the people, or "those more especially, who go at this day, under the opprobrious appellation of, the *Lower Orders of Men.*"

Thompson was not merely attacking the few aristocratic "Nabobs" who had humiliated him; he was actually assaulting the entire idea of a social hierarchy ruled by a gentlemanly elite. In fact he turned prevailing eighteenth century opinion upside down and argued that the social aristocracy was peculiarly *unqualified* to rule politically. Rather than preparing men for political leadership in a free government, said Thompson, "signal opulence and influence," especially when united "by intermarriage or otherwise," were really "calculated to subvert *Republicanism.*" The "persons and conduct" of the South Carolina "Nabobs" like Rutledge "in *private* life, may be unexceptionable, and even amiable, but their pride, influence, ambition, connections, wealth, and political principles," Thompson argued, "ought in *public* life, ever to exclude them from *public confidence.*" All that was needed in republican leadership, said Thompson, was "being *good, able, useful,* and *friends to social equality,*" for in a republican government "conse-

quence is from the *public opinion*, and not from *private fancy*." In the press Thompson sardonically recounted how he, a tavern keeper, "a *wretch* of no higher rank in the Commonwealth than that of Common-Citizen," had been debased by what he called "those *self-exalted* characters, who affect to compose the *grand hierarchy* of the State, . . . for having dared to dispute with a John Rutledge, or any of the NABOB *tribe*." The experience had been degrading enough to Thompson as a man but as a former militia officer it had been, he said, "insupportable"—indicating how revolutionary military service affected social mobility and social expectations. Undoubtedly, said Thompson, Rutledge had "conceived me his inferior." But like many others in these years—tavern keepers, farmers, petty merchants, small-time lawyers, former militia officers—Thompson could no longer "comprehend the *inferiority*." [4]

Many new politicians in the decades following, likewise not being able to comprehend their inferiority, used the popular and egalitarian ideals of the Revolution to upset the older social hierarchy and bring ordinary people like themselves into politics. This was not always easy, for, as some politicians complained, "the poorer commonality," even when they possessed the legal right to vote, seemed apathetic to appeals and too accepting of traditional authority. Their ideas of government had too long been "rather aristocratical than popular." "The rich," said one polemicist, "having been used to govern, seem to think it is their right," while the common people, "having hitherto had little or no hand in government, seem to think it does not belong to them to have any." [5] To convince the people that they rightfully had a share in government became the task of egalitarian politicians in the decades after the Revolution, giving birth in the process to modern democratic politics. This democratization of politics involved not only the legal widening of the electorate, but also the extension of practices begun before the Revolution in activating those who legally could but often did not vote.

[4] Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), pp. 482-483.

[5] Philadelphia, *Pennsylvania Evening Post*, July 30, 1776, quoted in David Hawke, *In the Midst of a Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1961), p. 187.

More and more offices, including judgeships, were made directly elective and everyone, it seemed, was now "running"—not, as earlier, simply "standing"—for election. New acts of persuasion using cheap newspapers and mass meetings were developed, and politics assumed carnival-like characteristics that led during the nineteenth century to participation by higher percentages of the electorate than ever again was achieved in American politics. In such an atmosphere of stump-speaking and "running" for office the members of the older gentry were frequently at a considerable disadvantage. In fact by the early nineteenth century being a gentleman or professing the characteristics of a gentleman became a liability in elections in some parts of the country, and a member of the gentry campaigning for votes was forced to take off his white gloves if he wanted to beat the tavern keeper who was calling him an aristocratic dandy.

One of the most graphic examples of this kind of change in American politics occurred in the 1868 election campaign for the fifth congressional district of Massachusetts—Essex County, the former center of Massachusetts Brahminism but by the mid-nineteenth century increasingly filled by Irish immigrants. The campaign was essentially between Richard Henry Dana, Jr., a well-to-do and Harvard-educated descendant of a distinguished Massachusetts family and author of *Two Years Before the Mast*, and Benjamin Butler, son of a boardinghouse keeper who had never been to college and one of the most flamboyant demagogues American politics has ever produced. (One gets some idea of Butler's standing with the Massachusetts elite by realizing that he was the first governor of Massachusetts in over two centuries not invited to a Harvard College commencement.) In the congressional campaign Butler showed Dana what nineteenth century electoral politics was all about. While Dana was talking to tea groups about bond payments, Butler was haranguing the Irish shoe workers of Lynn, organizing parades, turning out the fire and police departments, hiring brass bands, distributing hundreds of pamphlets and torches, and charging his opponent with being a Beau Brummel in white gloves. Dana was simply no match for him. When Dana was finally forced to confront audiences of workingmen, he gave up talking about bonds and even doffed his white gloves, trying desperately to assure his audiences that he too worked hard. All the while

Butler was making fun of his efforts to make common cause with the people. During one speech Dana told the Irish shoe workers that when he spent two years before the mast as a young sailor he too was a laborer who didn't wear any white gloves: "I was as dirty as any of you," he exclaimed. With such statements it is not surprising that Dana ended up with less than 10 percent of the vote in a humiliating loss to Butler.[6]

The rise of egalitarian politics, evident in Butler's campaigning, was the result not only of an expanded electorate but also of the final collapse of the older social hierarchy and the traditional belief in elite rule. It was this kind of change in the first half of the nineteenth century that made the rise of political parties both necessary and possible. Indeed, the United States was the first nation to develop modern political parties. The broadened electorate and the end of any sort of automatic assumption of political leadership by the social elite required new instruments for the mobilization of voters and the recruitment of leaders. Individuals, cut loose from traditional ties to the social hierarchy, were now forced to combine in new groups for political ends. Political office no longer was set by social ascription but rather was won by political achievement within the organization of a party and through the winning of votes. By vying for political leadership and competing for votes, new men—not necessarily as flamboyant as Butler but having the same social obscurity and doomed in any other kind of society to remain in obscurity—were fed into the political process and rose not because they became gentry but because they knew how to appeal to the people.

It was the American Revolution that helped to make possible and to accelerate these changes in our politics. As a result of this republican Revolution, Americans could not easily legitimize any status other than that of citizen. The people were all there was in politics and all of the people were equal. Any sort of unequal restrictions on the rights of citizenship—on the right to run for office or to vote, for example—were anomalies, relics of an older society, that now had to be done away with. In the early decades of the nineteenth century the permissive ideas of representation,

[6] Samuel Shapiro, " 'Aristocracy, Mud, and Vituperation': The Butler-Dana Campaign," *New England Quarterly*, vol. 31 (1958), pp. 340-360.

citizenship, and equality encouraged competing political parties to search out groups of people hitherto uninvolved in the political process and bring them in—renters denied the suffrage because they were not freeholders, poor men who lacked the necessary property qualifications, or newly arrived immigrants, anyone who might become a voter and supporter of the party, or even one of its leaders. If they could not yet legally vote, the vote could be given them. If they could legally vote but did not, then they could be convinced they ought to. In these ways American politicians in the decades following the Revolution worked to establish universal manhood suffrage and democratic politics.

We take these developments for granted and easily forget how far ahead of the rest of the world the United States was in the early nineteenth century. Tavern keepers and weavers were sitting in our legislatures while Europeans were still trying to disentangle voting and representation from an incredible variety of estate and corporate statuses. In 1792 Kentucky entered the union with a constitution allowing universal manhood suffrage. A generation later the English were still debating whether voting was a privilege confined to a few; in fact England had to wait until 1867 before workingmen got the vote and became, in Gladstone's words, "our fellow subjects." Indeed, in many parts of the world today the people are still waiting to become citizens, full participants in the political process.

II

Yet, as we all too well know, America's record in integrating the people into politics has not been entirely a success story. The great anomaly amidst all the revolutionary talk of equality, voting, and representation was slavery. Indeed, it was the Revolution itself, not only with its appeal to liberty but with its idea of citizenship of equal individuals, that made slavery in 1776 suddenly seem anomalous to large numbers of Americans. What had often been taken for granted earlier in the eighteenth century as part of the brutality of life—regarded as merely the most base and degraded status in a society of infinite

degrees and multiple ranks of freedom and unfreedom—now seemed conspicuous and peculiar. In a republic, as was not the case in a monarchy, there could be no place for degrees of freedom or dependency. In the North, where slavery was considerable but not deeply rooted, the exposure of the anomaly worked to abolish it: by 1830 in the northern states there were less than 3,000 black slaves out of a northern black population of over 125,000.[7] In the South the suddenly exposed anomaly of slavery threw southern whites, who had been in the vanguard of the revolutionary movement and among the most fervent spokesmen for its libertarianism, onto the defensive and gradually separated them from the mainstream of America's egalitarian developments.

Yet the very egalitarianism of America's republican ideology —the egalitarianism that undercut the rationale of slavery—worked at the same time to inhibit integrating the free black man into the political nation. Since republican citizenship implied equality for all citizens, a person once admitted as a citizen into the political process was put on a level with all other citizens and regarded as being as good as the next man. With the spread of these republican assumptions northern whites began to view black voters with increasing apprehension, unwilling to accept the equality that suffrage and citizenship dictated. In 1800 in many states of the North free Negroes possessed the right to vote (often as a result of the general extension of the franchise that took place during the Revolution), and they exercised it in some areas with particular effectiveness. But in subsequent years, as the electorate continued to expand through changes in the law and the mobilization of new voters, the blacks found themselves being squeezed out. There is perhaps no greater irony in the democratization of American politics in the first half of the nineteenth century than the fact that as the white man gained the vote the black man lost it. During the heyday of Jacksonian democracy white populist majorities in state after state in the North moved to eliminate the remaining property restrictions on white voters while at the same time concocting new restrictions to take away the franchise from Negro voters who had in some cases exercised it for decades. No state admitted to the

[7] Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 222.

union after 1819 allowed blacks to vote. By 1840, 93 percent of northern free Negroes lived in states which completely or practically excluded them from the suffrage and hence from participation in politics.[8]

This exclusion of blacks from politics was largely a consequence of white fears of the equality that republican citizenship demanded. But it was also a product of competitive democratic politics. In some states, like Pennsylvania, Negro exclusion was the price paid for lower-class whites' gaining the right to vote—universal manhood suffrage having been opposed on the grounds it would add too many blacks to the electorate. In other states, like New York, exclusion of the Negro from the franchise was an effective way for Democratic party majorities to eliminate once-and for all blocs of Negro voters who had tended to vote first for Federalist and then for Whig candidates. Since the Democratic party, as the spokesman for the popular cause against elitism, was in the forefront of the move to expand the suffrage, it seemed to be good politics for the party not only to attract new voters to its ranks but to take away voters who supported its opponents. It was this kind of political pressure that led to the peculiar situation in some states where immigrant aliens were granted the right to vote before they became citizens whereas Negroes born and bred in the United States had theirs abolished—a development often based on a shrewd assessment by politicians of what particular parties the new immigrants and the blacks would support.

For a republican society it was an impossible situation and Americans wrestled with it for over a half century. Federal officials in the first half of the nineteenth century could never decide the precise status of free Negroes, sometimes arguing that blacks were not citizens in having the right to vote but were citizens in having the right to secure passports. Others tried to discover some sort of intermediate legal position for free blacks as denizens standing between aliens and citizens. But the logic of republican equality would not allow these distinctions, and sooner or later many sought escape from the dilemma posed by Negro disfranchisement by denying citizenship outright to all blacks, whether slave or free,

[8] Leon F. Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 75.

the position Chief Justice Taney tried to establish in the Dred Scott decision of 1857. The suffrage had become sufficiently equated with representation in America so that if a person was not granted the right to vote then he was not represented in the community; and not being represented in a republican community was equivalent to not being a citizen. In the end enslaved blacks without liberty and free blacks without citizenship were such contradictions of the revolutionary ideals that sooner or later those contradictions had to tear the country apart.

When northerners came to debate methods of southern reconstruction at the end of the Civil War, they moved reluctantly but steadily toward Negro enfranchisement, impelled both by the logic of the persisting ideals of the Revolution and by the circumstances of politics. Although some historians have believed that the Republican party's espousal of Negro suffrage in the late 1860s was based on a cynical desire to recruit new voters to the party, it was obviously based on much more than that. In terms of political expediency alone the Republicans' sponsorship of Negro suffrage ran the risk even in the North of what we have come to call "white backlash." Many advocates of Negro suffrage sincerely believed, as Wendell Philips put it, that America could never be truly a united nation "until every class God has made, from the lakes to the Gulf, has its ballot to protect itself."[9]

Yet there can be no doubt that black enfranchisement after the Civil War was fed like all reforms, by political exigencies, and that many northerners and Republicans favored it grudgingly and only as a means of preventing the resurgence of an unreconstructed Democratic South that would threaten the dominance of the Republican party. Hence there resulted an awkward gap between the Fourteenth Amendment, which defined citizenship for the first time and gave it a national emphasis which it had hitherto lacked, and the Fifteenth Amendment, which enfranchised the Negro but unfortunately linked his enfranchisement not to his citizenship but to his race. This linkage allowed a state to impose any voting qualifications it chose so long as they were not based on race,

[9] James M. McPherson, "The Ballot and Land for the Freedmen, 1861-1865," in Kenneth M. Stampp and Leon F. Litwack, eds., *Reconstruction: An Anthology of Revisionist Writings* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), p. 138.

creating a tangled situation that twentieth-century Americans are still trying to unravel.

III

Although Americans have hesitated to make the connection between citizenship and the right to vote explicit and unequivocal, everything in American history has pointed toward that connection. During the past decade or so, largely under the impetus of the civil rights movement but going beyond that, there has been heightened interest in political and voting rights, and the logic of principles concerning suffrage and representation first articulated in the Revolution 200 years ago has been drawn out. Voting rights acts and the anti-poll tax amendment of the mid-1960s were based on a deeply rooted belief that no nation like ours could in conscience exclude any of its citizens from the political process. It was the same legacy from the Revolution that led the Supreme Court in a series of reapportionment decisions to apply the idea of "one man, one vote" to congressional and state legislative electoral districting. Large and unequal campaign contributions are of such concern precisely because they seem to negate the effects of an equal suffrage and to do violence to equality of participation in the political process. Despite an electorate that at times seems apathetic, interest in the suffrage and in the actuality and equality of consent has never been greater than it is today. Such a concern naturally puts a terrific burden on our political system, but it is a burden we should gladly bear (and many other nations would love to have it), for it bespeaks an underlying popular confidence in the processes of politics that surface events and news headlines make us too easily ignore.

In fact, concern with the suffrage and with the formal rights of consent has assumed such a transcendent significance that it has sometimes obscured the substance of democratic politics and has led to an exaggeration of the real power of the legal right to vote. The suffrage has become such a symbol of citizenship that its possession seems necessarily to involve all kinds of rights. Thus acquiring the vote has often seemed an instrument of reform, a

means of solving complicated social problems. The women's rights movement of the nineteenth century—premised on the belief, as one woman put it in 1848, that "there is no reality in any power that cannot be coined into votes"—came to focus almost exclusively on the gaining of the suffrage.[10] And when the Ninteenth Amendment giving women the franchise was finally ratified in 1920 and did not lead to the promised revolution, the sense of failure set the feminist movement back at least a half century—a setback from which it has only recently been recovering. Even today this formal integration into the political process through the suffrage continues to be regarded as a panacea for social ills. Certainly this assumption lay behind the response to the youth rebellions of the late 1960s and the eventual adoption of the Twenty-sixth Amendment granting eighteen-year-olds the vote.

This special fascination with politics and this reliance on political integration through voting as a means of solving social problems are legacies of our Revolution, and they are as alive now as they were 200 years ago. The Revolution not only brought ordinary people into politics. It also created such a confidence in the suffrage as the sole criterion of representation that we have too often forgotten just what makes the right to vote workable in America. In our dealings with newly developing nations we are too apt to believe that the mere institution of the ballot in a new state will automatically create a viable democratic society, and we are confused and disillusioned when this rarely happens.

The point is that we have the relationship backwards. It is not the suffrage that gives life to our democracy; it is our democratic society that gives life to the suffrage. American society is permeated by the belief in (and to an extraordinary extent by the reality of) equality that makes our reliance on the ballot operable. As historians in the past two decades have only begun to discover, it was not the breadth of the franchise in the nineteenth century that created democratic politics. The franchise was broad even in colonial times. Rather it was the egalitarian process of politics that led to the mobilization of voters and the political integration of the nation. It was the work of countless politicians recruited from

[10] Chilton Williamson, *American Suffrage from Property to Democracy, 1760-1860* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 279.

all levels of society and representing many diverse elements, attempting to win elections by exhorting and pleasing their electors, that in the final analysis shaped our democratic system. Any state can grant the suffrage to its people overnight, but it cannot thereby guarantee to itself a democratic polity. As American history shows, such a democracy requires generations of experience with electoral politics. More important, it requires the emergence of political parties and egalitarian politicians—none of whom have too much power and most of whom run scared—politicians whose maneuverings for electoral advantage, whose courting of the electorate, and whose passion for victory result in the end in grander and more significant developments than they themselves can foresee or even imagine. Politicians are at the heart of our political system, and insofar as it is democratic they have made it so.